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THE DATES OF CORNEILLE'S EARLY PLAYS

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THE DATES OF CORNEILLE'S EARLY PLAYS

In dating the plays that Corneille wrote before the *Cid* most modern scholars have accepted conclusions of the frères Parfaict,¹ Marty-Laveaux,² and a few other writers, without thoroughly testing them with recently discovered facts concerning Corneille's contemporaries and the stage for which they wrote. The following table gives the dates assigned to the first representations of his first eight plays by the frères Parfaict, Marty-Laveaux, and Lanson,³ as well as the date of each play's privilege and *achevé d'imprimer*.

	Frères Parfaict	Marty- Laveaux	Lanson ⁴	Privilege	Achévé
<i>Mélite</i>	1629	1629	1629	Jan. 31, 1633	Feb. 12, 1633
<i>Clitandre</i>	1632	1632	1632 (?)	March 8, 1632	March 20, 1632
<i>La Veuve</i>	1633	1633	1632 (?)	March 9, 1634	March 13, 1634
<i>La Galerie du Palais</i> ...	1634	1633, 1634 ⁵	1633	Jan. 21, 1637	Feb. 20, 1637
<i>La Suivante</i>	1634	1634	1633-4	Jan. 21, 1637	Sept. 9, 1637
<i>La Place royale</i>	1635	1634, 1635 ⁵	1633	Jan. 21, 1637	Feb. 20, 1637
<i>Médée</i>	1635	1635	1635	Feb. 11, 1639	March 16, 1639
<i>L'Illusion comique</i>	1636	1636	1636	Feb. 11, 1639	March 16, 1639

To estimate the correctness of these dates, let us turn first to the evidence given by Corneille himself. His statements as to the length of time he has been writing help us little, for

¹ *Histoire du théâtre français*, Paris, 1734-1748.

² *Œuvres de P. Corneille*, Paris, 1862-1868 (*Grands Écrivains* collection).

³ *Corneille*, second edition, Paris, 1905, pp. 11 and 48.

⁴ Lanson's dates are substantially the same as those given in 1885 by U. Meier, *ZSNS.*, VII, 127-135, except that the latter makes 1631 the date of *Clitandre* and has the *Suivante* precede the *Place royale*. Faguet has returned to Marty-Laveaux's dates in his recent volume, *En lisant Corneille*, Paris, 1913, p. 8.

⁵ I, p. xxiv, he gives the first date; II, 1, 9, the second.

⁶ I, p. xxiv, he gives the first date and explains his mistake in giving the second, found II, 215, 219.

in 1660 he calls this period thirty years, in 1668 forty, in 1682 fifty.⁷ They indicate merely that he began to write about 1628-1632. But he does render us valuable assistance when he states that *Mélite* was his first play,⁸ that *Clitandre* was written after a visit to Paris which followed the first representations of *Mélite*,⁹ that by March 13, 1634, he had written six plays,¹⁰ and that the order of the composition of his plays is that of their position in the first edition of his collected plays.¹¹ From these facts it is evident that *Mélite* and *Clitandre* were acted before March 8, 1632, date of the latter's privilege, that the *Veuve*, *Galerie*, *Suivante*, *Place royale* were composed in this order before March 13, 1634, and that

Médée and the *Illusion comique* appeared before the first representation of the *Cid*, which took place in December, 1636, or January, 1637. These facts seem certain. Let us now consider the plays separately.

1. *Mélite*. Fontenelle's date, 1625, is entirely inconsistent with other dates in Corneille's career, as will appear from the following discussion. The frères Parfaict¹² substitute for it 1629 on the ground that Mairat de-

⁷ *Discours du poème dramatique*, Marty-Laveaux, I, 16.

⁸ *Examen de Mélite*, Marty-Laveaux, I, 137.

⁹ *Examen de Clitandre*, Marty-Laveaux, I, 270.

¹⁰ *Au Lecteur de la Veuve*, Marty-Laveaux, I, 378.

¹¹ *Au Lecteur, Œuvres de Corneille*, Rouen et Paris, 1644, petit in-12; Marty-Laveaux, I, 2.

¹² IV, 462.

clared¹³ in 1636 that Rotrou, Scudéry, Corneille, Du Ryer began to write in this order after himself. To their knowledge that Rotrou began writing in 1628, Marty-Laveaux¹⁴ adds the information that Scudéry produced his first play "en sortant du régiment des gardes," and that he was in the army as late as March, 1629. He then states that Du Ryer's first play was *Argénis et Poliarque*, whose privilege was obtained February 25, 1630, and concludes that *Mélite* was first represented between these last dates. Eugène Rigal¹⁵ supports this conclusion by citing Corneille's assertion¹⁶ that *Mélite* "établit une troupe de comédiens à Paris," and by arguing that this troop, afterwards that of the Marais, began to play in the fall of 1629.

But Mairet's statement cannot be accepted with confidence. The passage in which it occurs is one in which he is trying to prove himself very precocious and the first in date of the new generation of dramatists. He deliberately changes his own birth-date for this purpose and may have pretended that Du Ryer began writing after Rotrou, Corneille, and Scudéry because it was he who was his nearest rival for priority. It is probable that Du Ryer wrote *Argénis et Poliarque* no later than the first part of 1629 and it is still more probable that he had already written two other plays.¹⁷ Moreover, it is by no means certain that Scudéry's first production appeared before 1630.¹⁸ Consequently Mairet's evidence does not prove

that *Mélite* was written in 1629, but merely that Corneille began to write about the same time as these other dramatists, in the period 1628-1630.

Rigal's opinion is influenced by his acceptance of Marty-Laveaux's dating. Mondory's troop, which, according to Corneille, was established by *Mélite*, was accused in a lawsuit, brought against it on February 25, 1631, of having at that time given 135 performances outside of the Hôtel de Bourgogne.¹⁹ From this accusation Rigal argues that, as in Chappuzeau's time (1674) the troops gave three performances a week, while at the beginning of the seventeenth century they had given only one, they gave probably two a week towards 1631, and that therefore Mondory's troop must have begun playing by the fall of 1629 in order to have acted 135 times by February 25, 1631.

But we do not have to go so far as the time of Chappuzeau to find a troop giving as many as three performances a week. When Molière returned to Paris, his company acted regularly either three or four times a week, probably continuing a custom already established at the capital. Occasional omissions of regular performances were offset by extra representations at the houses of the nobility, so that this troop gave 135 performances in less than ten months, between April 28, 1659, and February 10, 1660. Three performances a week, therefore, are not too high an average for Mondory's troop while it was trying to establish itself at Paris. Certainly there is nothing improbable in this number, so that the evidence indicates only that the new troop began to play either in the fall of 1629 or in the early months of 1630.

Finally, the use of the word "établir" does not show that Corneille's play was the first that Mondory represented. His troop may have struggled for several months before being permanently established by the representation of *Mélite*. Rigal's testimony, therefore, while showing that the play was not represented before 1629, by no means prevents the acceptance

¹³ *Épître dédicatoire to his Galantries du duc d'Ossonne.*

¹⁴ I, 129.

¹⁵ *Esquisse d'une histoire des théâtres de Paris*, Paris, 1887, pp. 75, 76.

¹⁶ *Examen de Mélite*, Marty-Laveaux, I, 138.

¹⁷ *Arétaphile and Clitophon*, which were never published. I have shown from statements in their *avertissement*, from their structure, and from the facts of Du Ryer's life that these were his first plays, brought out as early as 1628. Cf. *Pierre Du Ryer Dramatist*, Washington, 1912, pp. 33, 34; *Pierre Du Ryer, écrivain dramatique in Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 1913, pp. 313, 314.

¹⁸ Note the altogether unsatisfactory reasons for dating it 1629 given by Battereau in his *Georges de Scudéry als Dramatiker*, Leipzig, 1902, pp. 7, 8.

¹⁹ Endore-Soulié, *Recherches sur Molière*, Paris, 1863, pp. 164, 165; Rigal, *op. cit.*, 69.

of 1630 as the probable date of its first representation.

Positive evidence in favor of the 1630 dating was discovered by Dannheisser²⁰ as early as 1890, but it has been very generally overlooked. In one of the polemical articles occasioned by the *Cid*'s success, the *Avertissement au Besançonnois Mairêt*, mention is made of "cette malheureuse *Silvanire* que le coup d'essai de M. Corneille terrassa dès sa première représentation."²¹ Evidently, then, *Mélite* followed *Silvanire*. What was the date of the latter play?

Dannheisser shows that, while Mairêt, in the *Épître* to his *Galanteries du duc d'Ossonne*, deliberately changes his age to prove his precocity, the statements he makes with regard to the relative order of his own plays and the number of years that separated them from one another are probably correct. "Je composay ma *Chriseide* à seize ans. . . . *Sylvie*, qui la suivit un an après . . . Je fis la *Silvanire* à 21, *Le Duc d'Ossonne* à 23, *Virginie* à 24, *Sophonisbe* à 25, *Marc-Anthoine et Soliman* à 26." Therefore, since Marsan²² has established the date of *Sylvie* as 1626 or 1627, *Silvanire* was written in 1630 or 1631, preferably the former year as the privilege was obtained February 3, 1631.²³

Moreover, both Dannheisser and Marsan²⁴ call our attention to the following reference to *Silvanire* in the *Au lecteur* to the 1630 edition of *Sylvie*:²⁵ "Contente-toy de cet ouvrage ey, en attendant que je te donne une Tragi-Comédie purement Pastorale²⁶ de ma dernière

²⁰ Zur Chronologie der Dramen Jean de Mairêt's, *Romanische Forschungen*, V, 37-64, 1890.

²¹ Marty-Laveaux, III, 70.

²² *La Sylvie du sieur Mairêt*, Paris, 1905, pp. vii-xii.

²³ Had *Silvanire* been first produced in 1631, Mairêt would not have taunted Corneille with his unseemly haste in printing the *Cid* so soon after its first representation. Cf., below, my discussion of the date of *Clitandre*.

²⁴ *La Pastorale dramatique*, Paris, 1905, p. 375.

²⁵ *La Sylvie du sieur Mairêt*, 8. The *achevé d'imprimer* to this edition is not given.

²⁶ There can be no doubt of the fact that this means *Silvanire*, for Mairêt wrote no other pastoral than this after *Sylvie*.

et meilleure façon. Ce que je promets à ta curiosité, je le tiendray dans cette année 1630." If Mairêt is here referring to the approaching first representations of *Silvanire*, this is, of course, excellent proof that it appeared first in 1630, but even if he is referring only to its publication—and it seems strange that, if he is here promising its publication in 1630, he did not secure the privilege to print it till February 3, 1631—he still clearly implies that *Silvanire* is a new work, finished, perhaps, but not yet known to the public.

The preponderance of evidence points clearly, then, to the fact that *Silvanire* was first represented in 1630, and, indeed, this date has been generally accepted for it. But we continue to find 1629 set down as the year of *Mélite*'s first appearance. It is difficult to change a date so important as one that marks the opening of a great writer's career. Nevertheless, if we accept this date for *Silvanire*, and the evidence is most strongly in favor of it, we must acknowledge the logical implication that *Mélite*, which followed it, appeared no earlier than 1630.

That its first representation took place no later than the winter of 1630 is shown by Corneille's statement²⁷ that its "trois premières représentations ensemble n'eurent point tant d'affluence que la moindre de celles qui les suivirent dans le même hiver." This cannot mean the winter of 1630-1631, for that would place the first performance of *Mélite* too late to allow a reasonable time for the large number of representations that came between this first performance and February 25, 1631, date of the law-suit to which I have referred above. The reference must be to the winter of 1629-1630. Therefore, the conclusion that best fits all the facts in the case is that *Mélite* was first represented towards the month of February, 1630.

2. *Clitandre*. We know that this tragedy-comedy was written after its author had taken a trip to Paris to inquire about the success of *Mélite*,²⁸ and that the permission to print it

²⁷ *Épître à Monsieur de Liancourt*, Marty-Laveaux, I, 135.

²⁸ Marty-Laveaux, I, 373.

was obtained March 8, 1632. Its earliest possible date would therefore be late in 1630. It is improbable that it was first acted later than 1631, for at this period, according to Chapelain in a letter of March 9, 1640, a play was rarely published less than six months after its first representation. This was largely due to the fact that a play could be acted by a troop other than that which first gave it only after its publication.²⁹ It was consequently to the interest of the actors to keep it out of print as long as possible. For this reason Mairet considered Corneille's quick publication of the *Cid* an injustice to the actors for whom he wrote.³⁰ Unless we have proof to the contrary, as in the case of the *Cid*, it seems safe to assume that a play's first representation occurred at least six months before the date of its privilege. I conclude, therefore, that *Clitandre* should be dated, not 1632, but 1631 or late in 1630.

3. *La Veuve*. The privilege was granted March 9, 1634. Expressions in the dedication and in a poem published with the play, "le bon accueil qu' autrefois cette Veuve a reçu," "un temps si long sans te montrer au jour," show, as Marty-Laveaux points out,³¹ that considerable time elapsed between the first representation of this comedy and its publication. Consequently the *Veuve*, represented after *Clitandre* and before the *Galerie du Palais*, must have appeared in 1631 or 1632.

4. *La Galerie du Palais*. According to the *Au lecteur* to *la Veuve*, printed March 13, 1634, Corneille had written six plays by this time.³² Hence *la Galerie du Palais*, *la Suivante*, and *la Place royale* were already finished, as well as *Mélite*, *Clitandre*, and *la*

Veuve. A Latin poem, composed between September, 1633, and August, 1634, confirms this evidence by references to the *Galerie* and the *Place royale*.³³ It is probable, therefore, that the first of the three was written and acted as early as 1632. To give it an earlier date would crowd too many of Corneille's plays into the years 1630-1631 and put the unusually long period of six years or more between the first acting and the printing of the *Galerie*. To date it 1633, on the other hand, would put too many plays into this year. Therefore, 1632 is the probable date of the play.

5. *La Suivante*. The fact that this comedy was printed a few months later than the *Place royale* does not mean that its first representation followed that of the other play, as can be seen by comparing the case of *Clitandre*, published before *Mélite*, but represented after it. On the other hand, we have Corneille's statement that the *Suivante* preceded the *Place royale* and there is a reference to the former play in the latter.³⁴ The *Suivante* should therefore be dated between the *Galerie du Palais* and the *Place royale*, in the first half of 1633 or, perhaps, late in 1632.

6. *La Place royale*. Claveret's *Place royale* was acted before the king at Forges between June 15 and July 3, 1633.³⁵ Its author charged Corneille with undertaking his play of the same name "dès que vous sûtes que j'y travaillois." Probably both plays were begun before the royal visit and Corneille's was brought out in the latter half of 1633. We have seen that it cannot possibly have appeared later than March 13, 1634.

7. *Médée*. By a reference to one of Balzac's letters³⁶ Marty-Laveaux³⁷ shows that *Médée*

²⁹ Frères Parfaict, IX, 105.

³⁰ *Lettre familière*, quoted by the frères Parfaict, V, 269. Cf. also Marty-Laveaux, III, 8.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, I, 373.

³² Marty-Laveaux, I, 378. Though this scholar realized what inference was to be drawn from this evidence, he stuck to the traditional date, 1635, for the first representation of the *Place royale* till he learned of the next piece of evidence I cite. The correct inference was drawn in 1885 by U. Meier, *op. cit.*, VII, 131.

³³ Bonquet, Louis XIII et sa cour aux eaux de Forges, in *Revue des Sociétés savantes des départements*, 2e série, I, 611-642 (1859); Marty-Laveaux, X, 68.

³⁴ Marty-Laveaux, II, 260.

³⁵ *Lettre du Sieur Claveret au Sieur Corneille*, 10; Bonquet, *loc. cit.*; Marty-Laveaux, X, 64; U. Meier, *op. cit.*, VII, 131, 132. The latter was, I believe, the first to date Corneille's play by its association with Claveret's.

³⁶ To Boisrobert, April 3, 1635.

³⁷ II, 330, 331.

must have been represented before April 3, 1635. It could not have been written long before, as it is referred to as "presque achevée" in the *Parnasse* of La Pinelière,³⁸ a book printed in 1635, written perhaps as early as the latter part of 1634. The date assigned to *Médée* should be, then, the end of 1634 or the beginning of 1635 and not simply the latter year, as we ordinarily find it.

8. *L'illusion comique*. As Maresehal tells us in the preface to his *Railleur* that this play preceded Corneille's *Illusion*, Marty-Laveaux³⁹ dates the latter comedy 1636, having learned from the frères Parfaict⁴⁰ that the *Railleur* was first given that year. But the frères Parfaict admit that they date the *Railleur* 1636 because it preceded the *Illusion*. As a matter of fact we do not know the date of the *Railleur*,⁴¹ so that, while we wait for its discovery,

³⁸ Frères Parfaict, V, 166, and Marty-Laveaux, *loc. cit.*

³⁹ II, 424.

⁴⁰ V, 177.

⁴¹ If its author is correct in stating that it offers the first *miles gloriosus* of his generation, it must

we must date the *Illusion* between *Médée* and the *Cid*, in 1635 or 1636.


I conclude from the foregoing that the most probable dates for the first representations of Corneille's early plays are:

1. *Mélite*, 1630, towards the month of February.
2. *Clitandre*, 1631, possibly late in 1630.
3. *La Veuve*, 1631 or 1632.
4. *La Galerie du Palais*, 1632.
5. *La Suivante*, 1633, possibly late in 1632.
6. *La Place royale*, 1633, possibly 1634 before March 13.
7. *Médée*, end of 1634, or 1635 before April 3.
8. *L'illusion comique*, 1635 or 1636.

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have been represented at least as early as 1633, date of the publication of Rayssiguier's *Bourgeoise*, which contains among its characters "Le Vaillant, Fanfaron."



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